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Interactivity as Ideological Dilemma: A Socially Situated Reading of Interactivity Discourse in Three Civic Sites in the Italian Context

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Abstract

In debates about the potential role of the Internet in promoting civic engagement, interactivity is often seen to be synonymous with democratic participation and collaborative learning. The present article assesses whether online interaction is seen as something desirable in lived experience by analyzing the formation of interactivity discourse as an ideological dilemma. The article illustrates how the young Italian producers of three civic websites use and make sense of interactive applications in the context of their experiences and aims. In interviews with these producers, interactivity emerged as a problematic issue to deal with rather than a key feature of the medium in involving citizens in civic action and debate. The combination of the interactive nature of the Internet, the unequal power relations characterizing the online domain, and a potential openness to adversarial views can lead to the paradox of a further restriction of (online) participation by those who intend to promote it. Consequently, online interaction, even when accompanied with democratic aims, does not necessarily promote civic participation and collaborative learning. The article concludes by arguing that interactivity can become a learning opportunity when its use or nonuse is accompanied by critical reflection on our own social practices in the (online) public sphere.

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Introduction

In 2008, as students and teachers across Italy protested the Italian government's latest education reform, the Italian minister of education, university, and research, Mariastella Gelmini, posted the following statement on her YouTube channel: "I've decided to open a channel on YouTube because I want to discuss with you about school and university. I welcome projects and proposals, including critical ones. There's one thing I won't ever do: defend the status quo and surrender to privilege and waste. We must have the courage to change and we must do it together"[1] (Mariastella Gelmini presenta il suo canale su Youtube 2008). The minister presents the opening of a channel on the popular platform YouTube as the beginning of a discussion that will in turn lead to change—specifically, to a shared social and political achievement. The interactive nature of the Internet plays a key role in her argument. A mode of "interactivity discourse" is performed insofar as interactivity is "talked about" (in Foucault's terms; see Foucault 1977) and thereby socially constructed through a rhetorical strategy in a specific context. The act of starting a channel and inviting the public to participate in a "critical and public debate" at a particularly unfavorable moment for the ministry's reform plans can be read as a communicative strategy to open a "democratic dialogue" with citizens, students, and (especially) teachers. Interactivity is thus discursively constructed as a form of democratic participation. This mode of interactivity discourse rests on the commonly shared assumption that online interaction contributes to stronger participation in the public sphere.

Interactivity is part of a broader discourse on the correlation between societal change and technology. Although its definition is not univocal (Jensen 1998; McMillan 2002), I broadly refer to interactivity as "the relationship of the user with the communication supply and the relationships among the users themselves" (Bentivegna 2002, p. 54). Despite the fact that other "old" media, such as the telephone or a letter, also allow people to interact, the discursive correlation between interactivity and civic or political participation—and even learning—has become especially prominent with the introduction of "new" media and the Internet in particular. With the widespread dissemination of the Internet, interactivity discourse has increasingly merged within the broader social metaphor of the information/knowledge/network society (Castells 1996, 1997; Axford and Huggins 2001; Dahlgren 2003; Graber et al. 2003; Prensky 2006). As a whole, such discourses have had a "reality effect" on educational policies on an international scale. For example, information and communications technology (ICT)–based civic participation and education is an increasingly important element of recommendations and interventions addressing both the formal settings of learning, such as schools, and informal learning environments, such as local communities (European Commission 2003; Warschauer 2003; Selwyn 2007a).

The current emphasis on e-participation raises several issues, and empirical research is needed to assess the social functioning of interactivity discourse formulated in this way. By discussing some findings of a case study conducted on three Italian civic participation sites, the present article analyzes the construction of interactivity discourse in the lived experiences of the participants and thereby seeks to investigate the relationship between interactivity, civic participation, and learning. I hope to show that a socially situated analysis of interactivity discourse can offer new insights into the debate on the potential role of the Internet in promoting civic participation and learning among young people.

The Circular Relationship among Interactivity, Civic Participation, and Collaborative Learning

As extensively argued in the literature (e.g., Buckingham 2007; Bennett 2008), the debate on the relationships among digital technology, youth participation, and learning tends to veer between overly optimistic and overly pessimistic positions, both of which often rest upon a form of technological determinism and betray a scarcity of empirical evidence. When it comes to interactivity, this neat polarization favors the optimistic view, and enthusiasm largely overcomes fear. Although a few voices consider new media as detrimental to democratic participation and learning (Postman 1992; Virilio 2000), the concept is most often "loaded with positive connotations" (Jensen 1998, p. 185).

A common claim advanced to support the argument that interactivity plays a beneficial role is that it empowers young citizens as participants in the civic realm. The forms of "cyber libertarianism" propounded during the 1990s represent the most optimistic view. According to what is sometimes called the "cyber-libertarian manifesto," the use of global computer communications was to offer a new social space—cyberspace—that would be open to all citizens worldwide for sharing

information, engaging in political deliberation, freely expressing their beliefs, and challenging the authority of the state (Dyson et al. 1994; Barlow 1996a, 1996b). Even less celebratory writers saw computer-mediated communication as providing new citizen-centered spaces for political and civic engagement (Baddeley 1997; Jordan 1999). These claims are often applied to young people rather than adults. Some writers argue that for the former, peer-group dialogue and exchange take place to a greater extent online than offline (Rheingold 1993; Tapscott 1998). Rheingold, for example, considers the opportunities offered by the Internet as "a road to revitalize an open and thorough debate among citizens who wish to nourish the roots of a democratic society" (Rheingold 1993, p. 279).

A common theme of these claims is the interactive nature of the Internet as a medium, which allegedly guarantees the creation of an online Habermasian public sphere, a domain where "the sphere of private people come together as a public to engage themselves in a debate over general rules" (Habermas 1962/1989, p. 27). From this perspective, the "legitimate discourse" developed by Habermas (1984) or the "ideal discourse" described by Mezirow (1988)—a public debate free from coercion, open to other points of view, and accepting others as equal partners—is more easily achievable in cyberspace. (For further discussion, see Brlek Slaček and Hančič Turnšek (2010), in this issue of *IJLM*.)

As Hodgson (2002) and others have argued, in the literature on education the use of digital media also tends to be interpreted as a contribution to the democratization of educational relations and as a support to more collaborative and/or constructivist approaches to learning. For instance, the role of interactivity, along with the use of new technologies, in changing the education paradigm is manifest in interactive learning theory (Tapscott 1998) as well as in the writings of some technology gurus (Gates 1995; Negroponte 1995) and scholars who strongly support Web-based learning or e-learning (Phillips 1997; Clarke 2004; Sagar 2005). According to Tapscott, with their two-way communication pattern, new media enable an interactive model of learning in contrast to the "broadcast learning" favored by one-way, centralized media such as television. On the one hand, broadcast learning "focuses on instruction" and is the "foundation of an authoritarian, top-down, teacher-centred approach to education" (Tapscott 1998, p. 128). On the other hand, the interactive learning of the young "digital generation" is a process of collective construction and discovery of knowledge through which learners "rely on each other," "debate everything online," and "develop critical skills and the tolerance of diversity in their collaboration" (Tapscott 1998, p. 134). Moreover, interactive learning with new media is centered on the learner's individual experience, which goes beyond the formal educational setting of schools and implies a shift in the teacher's role from transmitter of information to facilitator of collaborative learning. Like other models of learning, the interactive model assumes a change of paradigm in education "from instructionism to constructivism" (Tapscott 1998, p. 144) driven by the use of new interactive media. As in Rheingold's online communities, where the Internet is a tool stimulating democratic practices, educational settings loaded with ICTs are seen as the privileged setting for learning how to act democratically. Within these narratives, the interactive features of new technologies are thus translated into specific attitudes and competencies commonly considered as essential in the promotion of democratic citizenship, such as active involvement in critical and constructive debate (Torney-Purta 2002) and the acceptance of plural perspectives (Figueroa 2000).

In sum, both the "online public sphere" view and the "interactive learning" narrative construct an a priori virtuous circular relationship among interactivity, civic participation, and collaborative learning. In both, the interactive medium becomes the message: it necessarily results in participation in the public sphere and/or interactive/collaborative learning. As with McLuhan's (1964) popular claim—the medium is the message—both narratives are based on a strong form of technological determinism (Williams 1974).

However, recent empirical research suggests that the evidence for such claims is limited. First, most surveys of the use of the Internet among young people demonstrate that access to the Internet does not necessarily imply political participation and that e-participation remains primarily confined to entertainment and leisure pursuits (Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper 2005; Hirzalla and Van Zoonen 2007). Furthermore, even though the use of Web-based technology may improve the quality of participation for those who are already active, the medium on its own does not seem to extend participation among the disengaged and the powerless (Gibson, Nixon, and Ward 2003; Gibson, Römmele, and Ward 2004; Warschauer 2003). In addition to this empirical research, qualitative research

has investigated the adoption of ICTs in schools and shown that in most cases ICTs are appropriated simply as a means to repackage and re-present existing knowledge, practices, and models of learning, without necessarily promoting the participative and critical dimensions of the learning process (Buckingham 2007; Selwyn 2007b).

These findings as a whole point to the need for a more socially situated approach in researching new media and youth participation in civic and political life. Nevertheless, most claims about the impact of technology in this area remain assertive and influential. Indeed, most recent studies also share the assumption that e-participation is unavoidable and even desirable in contemporary democracies. As Hirzalla points out in reviewing five books on the role of the Internet in democratic societies,[2] "[N]one of the authors assess the crucial question of whether Internet participation by citizens is something desirable in the first place" (Hirzalla 2007, p. 93).

Ideological Dilemmas

My socially situated reading of interactivity is mainly informed by the metaphor of "ideological dilemmas" (Billig et al. 1988). This approach is both a sociopsychological theory about "the way that thinking takes place through the dilemmatic aspects of ideology" (Billig 1988b, pp. 1–2) and an analytical approach for its exploration in everyday life. The theory starts from the assumption that "knowledge is socially shared and that common sense contains conflicting, indeed dissonant common themes" (Billig 1988c, p. 20). In Marxist theories of ideology (e.g., Althusser 1971), ideologies have an internally consistent pattern and form coherent sets of ideas that serve the purpose of representing the domination of the ruling sections of society as natural. In Billig's terms, this is an example of an "intellectual ideology"—that is, a unified "system of political, philosophical or religious thinking" (Billig 1988a, p. 27) that defines more or less explicitly how to think and act in society. Billig and his colleagues draw a conceptual distinction between such "intellectual ideologies" and "lived ideologies." Whereas the former are systems of thinking, the latter include the practices of a given society or culture. They are its "way of life" (Williams 1958), its common sense, which is ideologically invested insofar as it maintains social relations of power (Gramsci 1975), albeit in a fragmented and often contradictory way. Lived ideology and common sense comprise a range of potentially contradictory themes, and these enable the emergence of dilemmas, especially when people are faced with difficult decisions (Billig et al. 1988). Lived ideology is "reproduced as an incomplete set of contrary themes, which continually give raise to discussion, argumentation and dilemmas" (Billig 1988b, p. 6).

Context and Methodology

This article is based on three case studies carried out between February 2006 and April 2009 parallel to the CivicWeb research project. As in the main project, I focused on three key dimensions of the phenomenon:

- the production of the sites, which includes the producers' aims, motivations, working practices, positions in civil society, histories, and funding models;
- the nature and characteristics of the sites—that is, their content and formal features (design, mode of address, and combination among different modes of communication) and, in particular, the extent to which they invite active participation among their users both online and offline; and
- the uses and interpretations of the sites by participants (producers, users, visitors, and nonusers).

Unlike CivicWeb, in which qualitative and quantitative research methods were combined, I exclusively employed a qualitative, interpretative research design. The main aim of my study was not to assess whether such sites accomplish the civic participation they seek to promote but rather to explore how participants make sense of their use (or nonuse) of civic sites in their everyday life. From April to September 2006, I explored the range of civic sites established in the Italian context. I selected three websites produced by organizations "outside the realm of government," this being the preferred mode of participation by young people in Italy (see, e.g., the large EUYOUPART (2005) survey, which showed that 63 percent of youth participated in nonpolitical associations, whereas only 4 percent were members of political parties). The sites were selected on the basis of two main criteria: (1) their manifest aim to engage users in civic participation; and (2) the substantial presence of young people among the members of the organization and/

or the explicit "youth orientation" of the sites. In the end three sites were chosen: Il Veronese, Beppe Grillo's Friends Meetup Verona, and Global Project. The organizations behind all three sites are nonprofit, and participants' involvement in their online and offline actions is not remunerated.

Il Veronese (http://www.ilveronese.it/) is an online project established in 2006 by a cultural association called CivisMedia, which aims to inform users about local issues affecting citizens, as well as to promote online debate on social and political issues in local communities. To date, CivisMedia has designed five websites addressing the citizens of five small municipalities in the province of Verona. Il Veronese is financially supported by CivisMedia membership fees and by several small, private sponsors such as local shops and restaurants.

Gli Amici di Beppe Grillo di Verona (Beppe Grillo's Friends Meetup Verona) (http://www.beppegrillo.meetup.com/54/) is part of a massive network of more than 370 websites (as of May 2010) established by the followers of the Italian satirist Beppe Grillo. Since 2005, when Grillo established his blog (http://www.beppegrillo.it/), which is designed and produced by the marketing Web company Casaleggio Associati, the Internet has become a key component in his promotional strategy as both a comedian and an activist. Through his blog, Grillo has promoted or instigated several civic and political initiatives involving both online and offline civic actions. For example, in September 2007 and in April 2008 he organized two big v-day events ("v-day" stands for *vaffanculo day*, fuck-off day) in which thousands of people came down to the squares to protest against the endemic corruption of the national parliament and the lack of freedom of information in Italy. During the v-days, thousands of signatures were collected for two petitions aimed at changing (1) the current laws for the selection of political candidates and (2) the national funding system of the media, newspapers in particular. The massive mobilization for these events—about 2 million people participated in the first v-day, where 30,000 signatures were collected—was achieved by members of the local "meetups" through, for example, online and offline advertising of the event. Like all of Grillo's Friends Meetup sites, the one in Verona is funded by the members themselves. The online service, provided by the American company Meetup, costs $12 per year. Grillo's strategy of promotion of "direct democracy" is questioned by some critics who highlight the conflict of interest between his political and commercial aims (Luttazzi 2009). The comedian himself presents his "friends' websites" as a mode of promotion of grassroots democracy where citizens are encouraged to take action at the local level on social and political issues, drawing on Grillo's popularity for the promotion of their own initiatives.

Global Project (http://www.globalproject.info) is a website managed by activists of a social movement linked to the Italian "social centers," known since the 1970s as one of the major radical left phenomena in Italy. In the last 40 years different groups involved in anticapitalist, feminist, and antifascist—and lately antiglobalization—movements managed to set up "self-managed social centers" in urban areas across Italy. The centers are usually squatted properties reconverted to venues for social, political, and cultural events (Mudu 2004). Global Project partly represents the "online face" of this tradition of political engagement and is part of a broader strategy to take action in the public realm, especially offline. The website is self-funded, managed by the most engaged members of the organization, and financially sustained mainly through events such as music festivals that take place in the self-managed social centers.

From March to July 2007 I conducted 22 focus group interviews with 60 participants. The interviews served the double function of rethinking and contextualizing my earlier analysis of the websites on the basis of the interviewees' representations and exploring in depth how the participants make sense of their use (or nonuse) of such sites. All the interviewees were from 18 to 28 years old, excepting two producers of Global Project, who were in their 30s. Each group interview lasted one to two hours and was audiotaped and transcribed. I interviewed the site producers (primarily coordinators, designers, and content editors), young users who were particularly engaged in the online production of content (e.g., articles, videos, and forum postings) and/or in promoted initiatives, young people who accessed the sites more or less regularly, and young people who had not used the sites. Men and women were about equally represented (53 percent of the interviewees were female), but social classes were not (88 percent of the interviewees were middle class).

In the present article I focus mainly on the interviews with the producers. Experiences and aims function as the main contextual frameworks for the analysis of the discussions. The analysis presents symptomatic instances selected from the extensive

range of data collected and analyzed in the wider study (which also includes a large amount of textual analysis and interviews with users of the sites). Findings from the website analyses and the interviews with young users, visitors, and nonusers are mentioned when useful to the discussion.

Interactivity between Utopian Ideals and Censorship

The project of Il Veronese exists only online, except for some rare offline initiatives by the young members of the editorial staff that are primarily aimed at promoting the website among the local citizens. The website presents itself as a "service for the citizens" of Verona that provides them with mainly locally oriented information that is otherwise disregarded by mainstream media. The site is also intended to stimulate (online) debate among citizens in order "to promote their participation in the social, cultural and political life of Verona" ("Progetto" [n.d.]). According to Il Veronese, civic participation is thus a matter of online deliberation and consultation rather than the organization and coordination of specific offline actions. In an interview, Giovanni (26 years old), founder and coordinator of the editorial staff, conceptualized the participation they aspire to promote as "a critical and constructive dialogue among citizens with regard to the problems of the local community." In addition, he defined the online forum of their website as "the highest expression of participation offered through Il Veronese."

Arguments like Giovanni's tend to associate online interaction with participation and to construct an "empowerment discourse" attributed to the Internet. These discourses are the key concepts of the "intellectual ideology" shared and promoted by the producers of Il Veronese. Yet, as the young users declare and the producers themselves admit, people participate only sporadically in the forum, and when they do, most of the time they do not engage in a "constructive dialogue on the problems of the community." A temporary shutdown of the Il Veronese forum, which occurred while I was monitoring the site, suggests that the management of the forum was problematic. The forum was closed for a few weeks after some users saw their comments being deleted by the moderators and accused them of censorship. Mario (28 years old), coordinator of the editorial staff and webmaster, explained why some comments had been deleted:

> *Interviewer*: Do you intervene as editorial staff on the forum?
>
> Well, we intervene sporadically on the forum. The idea would be not to intervene as editorial staff because it [the forum] is a free space. Sometimes taunting or even rude comments were posted, and we had to delete them because swear words were present and we put the policy "no swear words" and so maybe we intervene to explain why we deleted the posts . . . because if you don't say anything then they say "so you ban the posts!" No, *we don't ban*, there is a policy of good behavior like for those on the street, . . . we follow that. Then if you want to say, I don't know, you don't like the high-rise they built or rather the football team, say whatever you want, but in polite terms. A very hot debate also with divergent positions but always with the willingness to understand each other at least—that's what we'd like to promote . . . to change a bit the style we were transmitted by the society we live in—"everybody must become all arrogant, aggressive, and I ride roughshod over other people as soon as I can and . . ." Personally I don't like this style, nor do my friends; so we want to foster another style.—*Mario*

In response to the interviewer's general question about the participation of the editorial staff in the forum, Mario describes specific cases of post deletion. His response suggests he construes the moderators' participation on the forum as a form of moderation rather than a form of discussion with the users. Mario then underlines the gap between the forum as a space of free expression and the moderators' practice of deleting some posts. These opposite themes—freedom of speech and censorship—help define the "lived ideology." The deletion practice is presented as unavoidable and necessary ("we had to delete them [i.e., the comments with swear words]"). The need for deleting, Mario continues, comes from users breaking the website's "good behavior" policy. Mario first presents this policy as something the site managers have created ("we put the policy") but then described it as an independent and natural entity rather than something written by them. The representation of the policy as "natural" is discursively enacted in two modes: first, by the use of reported speech, through which the policy speaks

with an autonomous voice: "no swear words"; second, by Mario explaining the policy by calling upon an unquestionable principle called "good behavior," which excludes "taunting and swear words." The policy is presented as fundamental to support the desire of the producers to promote a "different style of communication" characterized "at least by the willingness to understand each other." This is part of a rhetorical strategy in which Mario uses the representation of a "naturalized policy" in order to reject the accusation of censorship.

Rather than the argument itself—that is, the understandable necessity to regulate the forum in order to avoid online discussions degenerating into reciprocal invective—the most interesting aspect of the excerpt is the naturalization process Mario employs to justify the action of censorship. The use of further reported speech to represent the voice of the users—"so you ban the posts"—suggests hostility between the users and the forum's moderators. Mario at first narrates such antagonism by positioning the producers as victims, as those accused of banning the posts, and then as mere executors of a natural form of regulation. These "discursive devices" (Wood 2000, p. 101) serve the function of acquitting the producers of the accusation of censorship.[3] This example instantiates the much wider tension between the ideal of interactivity as a means of promoting democratic debate and the censorship of content needed to fulfill the organization's aims and values.

The Dilemma of the "Shy Fascist"

Beppe Grillo's Friends Meetup Verona is, first of all, a group of (mainly young) people engaged in promoting offline initiatives at the local level, especially initiatives related to environmental issues. Grillo's "Friends" use their site mainly to support their offline civic actions. The site is a Web 2.0 platform that allows free online interaction among members. Nevertheless, as Luca (26 years old), the organizer of this group, specified, "[T]he main aim of the online platform is the arrangement of offline activities," and "the most relevant decisions are made during face-to-face meetings among members." An analysis of the website confirms that in this case the Internet *is* employed more as a coordination tool for activities already debated offline than as a space for discussion. Unlike Il Veronese, members need to register in order to participate online (and also offline in their organizational meetings).[4] In an interview Luca defined the registration as a "form of precaution" against "trolls" and, in so doing, he showed great awareness of the contradictory dimensions of the (online) public sphere. Despite this precaution, even Luca, as a moderator, was obliged to censor a user within the community:

> Last year, when the constitutional referendum took place, this character, a weird guy to tell the truth, presented himself with the nickname "Dario the FASCIST." His avatar picture was not the Duce [Mussolini] but a fascist badge, the flag of the Italian Social Republic [a fascist German-dependent Italian state established during the Second World War and led by Mussolini from September 1943 to April 1945 after the fall of fascism]. This guy had never done direct propaganda for fascism, such as inciting to racist hatred; he wasn't the kind of fascist who writes . . . you know, "no to the niggers." He was a fascist who tried to rehabilitate Mussolini and attempted to lead the meetup to join his causes "because we share the same ideas, because we fight for the country," he said. . . . Well, having a fascist in the meetup was disgusting to me—try and think of working with him—but this guy didn't give up with his Mussolini propaganda and his fascist ideas. So after a while he was told, "listen, either you abandon the meetup yourself or you'll be banned because we reject all racist ideals," and in the end we didn't ban him but he left by himself. . . . However we had a meeting in which we all agreed and decided that he was to be chased out.—*Luca*

Luca collocates the user—"the guy"—in terms of political categories. First, as suggested by the loud emphasis, Dario is a fascist. Paraphrasing, Luca cites as evidence of Dario's fascism his use of related symbols—the fascist badge and the flag of the Italian Social Republic—and his attempt to rehabilitate Mussolini. Luca continues with the story of a user who does not directly state racial hatred, a significant part of fascist ideology, but at the same time promotes fascism.

The discursive formation of the "shy fascist," characterized by the coexistence of different interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell 1987)—fascism and the absence of racism, or antifascism and

racism—is reminiscent of current political discourses among conservative Italian members of parliament. The case of Gianfranco Fini, the present president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, is a clear example of this discursive formation. On the one hand, over the last 15 years Fini has progressively distanced himself from fascism. From the 1970s to the early 1990s he was an active member of a neofascist party, Movimento Sociale Italiano. In 1995 he founded a "postfascist" party with more moderate positions and a public antifascist rhetoric.[5] In recent years he has made liberal arguments; for example, proposing to extend political rights to immigrants. On the other hand, in 2002 he promoted an immigration law, the so-called Bossi-Fini law, that does not comply with the rights of migrants and refugees established by the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Amnesty International 2008). With a similar kind of discursive formation, Dario did not incite to racial hatred: "he wasn't the kind of fascist who writes, you know, 'no to the niggers.'" Had Dario been explicitly racist, Luca probably would have had an easier time explaining why he was not accepted on the site.

The problem the interviewee has to deal with is how to justify to the interviewer the exclusion of the "shy fascist" from their group. Luca partially solves the problem when he argues, assuming a position as spokesperson of Beppe Grillo's Friends, "we reject all racist ideals." In so doing, he claims the irreconcilability between the group's values and racist ideals. Nevertheless, the choice to ban Dario as a declared fascist is at odds with the proclaimed ideology and membership policy of Beppe Grillo's Friends, which explicitly reject political labeling and traditional political categories such as right and left. For example, Grillo himself has defined political parties as "the cancer of democracy," and members of political parties (including at local levels) cannot be active members in the group. In another interview, Marco (22 years old), Luca's assistant, gave his definition of politics, which can be considered as representative of the group because it recalls the definition given on the group's website: "We fight for our ideals, we are unaligned, we are neither right wing nor left wing but we are not apolitical . . . we make politics in the noblest sense of the term because we deal with the problem of the polis . . . nowadays political categories such as right and left are meaningless."

An implicit motivation in excluding Dario was the fact that he is a fascist ("to have a fascist in the meetup was disgusting to me"). By excluding a member because of his political position, Luca contradicted the ideology of Beppe Grillo's Friends. Even though, in theory, "political categories such as right and left are meaningless," when the matter of banning someone from the group came up, the decision was made based on values that historically and in the present are part of such political categories.

The Online Public Sphere as a Site of Struggle among Sociopolitical Identities

Global Project—sustained by a network of people based in social centers all over Italy and by some collaborators abroad—specifically addresses the activists of a social movement that can be broadly defined as left wing. Although the organization refuses to take sides in institutional politics, its political position is clearly defined. The site has no interactive applications allowing users to produce content or to communicate among themselves. Rather, the platform is used for one-way communication to highlight specific news and social and political issues particularly relevant to the activists of the movement and to represent their offline activities (e.g., demonstrations and cultural events).

Like the producers of the other sites, Livia (36 years old) talked about interactivity as a thorny issue:

> *Interviewer*: Have you ever thought about making a forum? To create a sort of interactivity with the users?
>
> Well, this is the other aspect we should develop, that is the exchange with the user which presently our site, I mean maybe is a limitation, we can say, of the site. The user doesn't have the chance to have an exchange with us, to collaborate with the project. . . . But it's also true that when we were born we were different from Indymedia Italy, which was open to everybody. Ours is a project born within a political project. Thus it is logical that we manage the content. *We* are the ones who want to say something. But we definitely should develop better the aspect regarding the relationship with users, which presently is a bit like that . . . absent.—*Livia*

Livia seemed to perceive my question as a criticism. In this part of the interview we were talking about some

changes the producers wanted to implement on their website. Livia had just listed some changes and perhaps at this stage of the interview she interpreted the question about interactivity as a further change recommended by the interviewer. At a discursive level, she develops her argument in three steps: (1) the absence of the forum as a hypothetical limitation of the site; (2) the reason for the absence as one that distinguishes Global Project from Indymedia Italy; and (3) the reaffirmation of the hypothesis that the absence of peer relationship with the user is a limitation. With these three steps Livia performs a particular discursive strategy. On the one hand—in order to avoid the presentation of Global Project as nonparticipatory to a researcher interested in e-participation—she hypothesizes the absence of a forum as a critical limitation to be overcome. On the other hand she argues the need for this limitation in relation to the political aims of the project. The hypothetical status of a possible implementation of interactivity is seen linguistically by the use of "maybe" and a conditional verb ("we should develop"). The unavoidable status of the limitation as deriving from the political nature of Global Project is represented by the expression "thus it is logical." In addition, the rhetorical use of the word *we*, repeated three times—"we manage the content," "we did it," "we are the ones who want to say something"—suggests an identification with a defined political line, which implies the impossibility of opening up to conflicting ideas. The discursive practice enacted here reveals a tension between what she would like to show the interviewer—an interest in interacting with users—and what happens in practice—the choice not to have any form of interaction. This tension shows once again how the interactivity discourse functions in relation to contrary ideological themes.

Two of the Global Project producers—Elisabetta (28 years old) and Marco (26 years old)—discussed the interactivity issue in depth. They also mentioned the "Indymedia Italy case" as evidence of the difficulty in reconciling online free interaction and political action.[6] They claimed that their choice to constrain interactivity was "long-suffered" because, at the same time, they theoretically fostered the "cooperative philosophy of the net." Elisabetta said, "We are at the forefront in supporting the cooperative mechanism of the Net and of free production." Nevertheless they showed full awareness of the practical problems implied in the philosophy. Marco argued that participation as "keyboard activism is very limited in relation to our way of conceiving of activism," and Elisabetta said that their "participation is based on the (offline) participation in the social centers."

In the case of Global Project, the producers' use of interactivity discourse reflects a tension between the cooperative and democratic philosophy they aim to promote (intellectual ideology) and the conscious choice not to allow any form of public interaction on the site (lived ideology). This tension can be understood in light of the politically defined position of the group, whose online existence is incompatible with full openness to interactivity because such openness implies the risk of being easily attacked and destroyed by trolls with opposing political views (as happened to Indymedia Italy). The presence of a forum with free access represents a risk that the producers of Global Project do not want to take, in spite of their celebration of the "free production of knowledge" and the "network philosophy." Being closed to free interaction can also characterize the media strategy of organizations with political views opposite to those of Global Project.[7] The way in which the "interactive discourse" surfaces further confirms that interactivity is not just a matter of democratic dialogue but chiefly a dilemmatic matter of conflict.

All three cases show that, from the interviewees' perspectives as producers/moderators, interactivity is far from unproblematic. How the site producers talk about the presence or absence of online interaction with users shows that interactivity discourse is a focus of tensions and contradictions between intellectual and lived ideologies. In the case of Il Veronese, the producers' representation of the forum as a space of free expression contrasts with their censorship practices. Beppe Grillo's Friends' "politics beyond political categories" is at odds with parameters of inclusion/exclusion that are based on politically defined values (especially antifascism). Global Project producers explicitly declare the irreconcilability of their politically defined position and their "Net philosophy" of free online production of content. This range of ideological dilemmas helps show to what extent and why the employment of full and open online interaction is so problematic. In some contexts, free interaction among users appears to make the producers' civic goals, including that of fostering debate, even harder to promote and to achieve. Il Veronese has recently introduced a requirement for prior registration to participate in the online forum (no such requirement was in place when I conducted my study), further confirming a need to regulate interaction in order to

keep the debate within the organization's parameters, values, and ideology.

This does not imply that the employment of interactive applications is always counterproductive for democratic participation but rather that the issue is sensitive and needs careful consideration. Online interaction can be crucial for the working practices of the active members of these groups: for example, both the activists of Global Project and the collaborators of Il Veronese use interactive applications (online conferences and a forum with password access, respectively) in order to pursue the coherent collaborative production of online content. However, these working practices suggest that online interaction may promote participation when the users are *already* engaged and *already* share a common view. In such cases, the regulation of online interaction—and interactivity itself—serves the purpose of construction and support of a common view rather than open discussion about this view with a wider audience.

Conclusions

My reading of interactivity as an ideological dilemma is an attempt to contextualize the current debate on the role of the Internet in promoting civic participation and collaborative learning. The findings of the present study highlight the conflictual and contradictory nature of the (online) public sphere and question the theory of interactive learning. The findings testify to the fact that online interaction emerges as a matter of conflict between different perspectives rather than as a ready-made formula. In this respect, the Habermasian public sphere seems to be a utopian ideal whether offline or online. Some old critiques regarding the public sphere theorized by Habermas are still relevant in the present context, however (Fraser 1989; Benhabib 1992; Calhoun 1992). In particular, questioning the assumption that citizens have equal willingness and competence to participate in public debate, whether offline or online, still seems legitimate. Here, the nature of the preparticipative social space is crucial in regulating access to the (online) public sphere (Fraser 1989). The analysis of interactivity as ideological dilemma shifts the focus of the debate from the role of the Internet in promoting more equal participation to the preconditions for accessing the public sphere and the power relations characterizing the wider social context.

The construction of a social identity seems to be a precondition for those aiming at promoting online participation. In turn, social identity needs especially to be safeguarded online because online space may be open to a wider range of conflicting positions. Therefore, the ideological dilemma translates into a paradox: the need to restrict participation by those who would promote it. The choice of screening interactivity from adversarial positions is lived as a necessary compromise that, by filtering out the "noise," enables a more targeted focus on the promoters' aims, so that no further effort needs to be devoted to publicly defending their social identity. Ultimately, full interactivity is not synonymous with democratic participation because, as Heath and Potter argue in their critique of cyber-libertarianism, "unrestricted freedom does not promote peace, love and understanding . . . it simply creates a Hobbesian state of nature" (Heath and Potter 2005, p. 310). More broadly, any "technological fixing" of social problems is unlikely to succeed, because the problems at stake are essentially social, political, and economic rather than technological. E-participation, which is often presented as the solution to the lack of offline participation, will make little difference if it is not accompanied by critical thinking about the nature of civic participation more broadly. "Interactivity for participation" is not good or bad in itself. Rather, it should be critically investigated within specific social contexts of use.

I opened this article with an example of the discursive construction of interactivity as democratic participation: the response of the Italian Ministry of Education to the protest against the government's recent education reform. Despite the government's response, no dialogue has yet taken place on YouTube, the reform has not been changed in response to the students' and teachers' demands, and thousands of teachers, mostly women, have lost their jobs or continue to work in a precarious position. This case exemplifies that interactivity discourse as mere argument—I interact with you, so I am democratic—is a rhetorical strategy that, in certain social circumstances, can play the function of political (or broadly ideological) propaganda rather than promoting a democratic dialogue aimed at substantial change.

My reading of the (online) public sphere as a site of struggle also strongly challenges some of the pedagogic promises and assumptions of theories of interactive learning (Tapscott 1998). The findings presented here suggest that online interaction, even when paired with democratic aims, does not automatically produce collaborative learning. The users'

views and uses of such sites—although not thoroughly discussed here—also suggest that a two-way communication pattern does not necessarily imply an open process of construction and discovery of knowledge (Tapscott 1998). Ultimately, the informal online community can be just as hierarchical as more formal learning settings (such as the classroom).

The need to construct a social identity in order to act collectively in the (online) public sphere can also be seen as a process of defining legitimate knowledge—or a sort of hidden curriculum defining what can or cannot be debated within the (online) community. The acceptance of what counts as legitimate knowledge is an essential precondition to participation in the learning process within the community. The present case studies suggest that even when the websites' producers and moderators are open to a discussion with users, the critique is accepted only so long as the social identity of the organization is not threatened. If power is the ability to make choices (Kabeer 1999), then we ought to recall that within online communities the power to define legitimate knowledge is not equally shared by members. The construction of knowledge does not happen through an interaction where equality is guaranteed. In cyberspace, knowledge is not always a process of collective construction and can be the result of a process of selection/regulation led by those who are, explicitly or implicitly, legitimated in making choices. Here again, online learning settings can be just as hierarchical as learning settings in schools. However, the existence of power positions does not automatically imply an authoritarian model of learning: a position of power can be used to question and share power, even though such options do not seem practicable through a fully open online interaction.

Ultimately, the interactivity dilemma raises questions about power, which leads people to think of themselves in social terms, not least through their relationship to people with different views. Thinking of oneself in social terms constitutes a form of "political thinking" and is a prerequisite of civic/political participation.[8] From this perspective, interactivity is neither the solution to nor the problem with the promotion of civic participation. Rather, interactivity represents a learning opportunity when its use or nonuse is accompanied with critical reflection on our own social practices. As such, it may contribute to the social awareness required to act in the (online) public sphere. We must, therefore, go beyond interactivity as such, which is more and more a sort of "moral imperative" for the "good" citizen in contemporary democracies, and address our efforts, as researchers and educators, to promote a deeper understanding of the social, political, and economic functions of our relationship with the Internet and with media more broadly.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, this and other translations from the Italian are by the author.
2. The books are Chadwick 2006, Dahlberg and Siapera 2007, Dahlgren 2007, Keren 2006, and Loader 2007.
3. According to this approach, "[T]he aim of the analysis is not to expose the discursive strategies and their inconsistencies as signs of hypocrisy to judge the interviewees but rather to explore the dialectic of discourse meanings" (Billig 1988c, pp. 23–24)—that is, to identify how interactivity discourse is constructed in a dilemmatic way when it is discussed in the light of everyday practices.
4. After I concluded my analysis of Il Veronese, it, too, introduced a registration requirement for participation in its online forum.
5. For a brief account of Fini's political career, see Holmes 2006. For an in-depth analysis of Movimento Sociale Italiano, see Mammone 2008.
6. In 2006 Indymedia Italy (http://italy.indymedia.org/) was closed for a long period by its producers. One of the main reasons they closed the site was that a massive invasion of "fascist trolls" on the free access forum prevented Italian Indymedia activists from fully using the interactivity of the site for their political purposes.
7. For example, the websites of Italy's two main far-right movements (Forza Nuova and Casa Pound) do not allow a fully open interaction with users. See http://www.forzanuova.org/ and http://www.casapounditalia.org/.
8. Buckingham defines "political thinking" as a "sociocultural phenomenon" implying a "view of the self in social terms." Political thinking "prepares the ground for forms of collective action" and thus is a "prerequisite of political consciousness" (Buckingham 2000, 205).

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